



## Child abuse in Gabrielle Tallent's *My Absolute Darling*

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**Abstract.** This study discusses about child abuse that is experienced by Julia “Turtle Alveston in Gabrielle Tallent’s *My Absolute Darling*. This study tells about the abuse that is experienced by Turtle, the main character. This study aims to reveal three points: the kinds of child abuse, the causes of child abuse, and the effects of child abuse of that happen to Turtle Alveston. This study uses the psychological approach of literature as it helps to find out how Turtle experiences the abuse that is done by her father, Martin. Gabrielle Tallent’s *My Absolute Darling* is used as the source of the data. Some quotations are added to support the analysis. As the results, the writer finds that the cause of the abuse is family dynamics as a pivotal factors in perpetuating child abuse. Also, the kinds of abuse found are psychical abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, verbal abuse, coercive control, intimidation and threats, and sexual abuse. Last but not the least, the effects of the abuse are psychological and emotional trauma, social dysfunction, and physical health issues and behavioral problem.

**Keywords:** Child Abuse, Family Dynamics, Social Dysfunction, Psychological Trauma, Physical Health Issues and Behavioral Problem

### INTRODUCTION

According to Convention on the rights of the child (CRC 1989) children is defined as any human being below the age of 18 years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. This definition is not merely about a numerical age but encompasses the developmental, psychological, and social aspects that distinguish children from adults (Garnida and Supsiadji, 2018). It acknowledges the unique needs, rights, and vulnerabilities of individuals within this age group. Children are in a crucial stage of growth and development, requiring protection, nurturing, and guidance to reach their full potential. Children have the right to a safe, supportive environment that fosters their physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development, ensuring they are free from exploitation, harm, and discrimination (Litaay, 2019). This definition is aligned with the principles set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlines the basic rights of children worldwide.

Children are a gift from God and should be looked after and loved. A child has rights like humans in general, which must be an important focus for parents or even adults. As a parent, or someone who is entrusted with looking after and loving children, you must take care and pay attention to the place where the children are. Children are the next

generation of the nation. Their future depends on how their social community is run. Therefore, a child has the right to be free and protected from all acts of violence that threaten his life. When discussing children, there are many instances where parents or even adults use children as a means of committing violence for various reasons. There are many cases of abuse that involve children (Litaay, 2019). Children should have fun with their peers rather than being victimized by their elders. This situation is not impossible to have occurred around us, especially in our own family environment. Abuse does not only happen to adults, but also to children. We can conclude that problems like this should be addressed by the authorities.

According to WHO abuse is any form of behaviour or act that is intentional to have authority over, intimidate, force, or hurt another person. It is a mishandling of an authority which uses the connections of closeness, faith and reliance to make the sufferer vulnerable. Abuse can be affective, mental, monetary, sexual, and bodily, but abuse is not restricted to any one of these. Any exploitation, mishandling, or misuse of control for the intention of conniving the behaviours, events, opinions, or thoughts of another person is abuse. Child abuse encompasses a range of harmful behaviors directed towards children (Sanderson C 2004). It can be physical, sexual or emotional, but can just as often be about a lack of affection, care and attention. WHO defines child abuse and neglect, or child maltreatment, as all forms of physical or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or neglectful action, or commercial or other mistreatment ensuing in definite or possible harm to the child's health, continued existence, growth or self-esteem in the circumstance of a relationship of accountability, trust or Authority.

In Gabriel Tallent's novel, *My Absolute Darling* the exploration of child abuse takes center stage, offering readers a poignant and unflinching portrayal of the psychological repercussions endured by the protagonist, Turtle Alveston. Set against a contemporary backdrop, the novel navigates the intricate terrain of trauma, unraveling the complex interplay between abuse and its profound impact on the child's psyche. The psychological analysis embedded in the narrative goes beyond the mere depiction of abuse; it delves into the intricate layers of Turtle's internal world, unraveling the lasting effects of her harrowing experiences. As readers navigate the pages of the novel, they are invited into the depths of Turtle's consciousness, witnessing the shaping of her identity, the warping of her self-perception, and the profound influence of trauma on her mental landscape.

The problems above become the reason why the writer choose the tittle *Child Abuse in Gabrielle Tallent's My Absolute Darling* because based on the various child abuse presented in the novel *Gabrielle Tallent's My Absolute Darling*, will be interesting to discuss more in the research. This research will analyze the kinds, cause, and effects of child abuse experienced by the main character Julia Turtle Alveston. It also expected that this research will make readers understand the kinds, cause, and effects of child abuse experienced by Turtle as the main character in the novel *My Absolute Darling*, and can also be used as reference for those who are interested in the same topic in next future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The psychology of literature examines how literary works can be interpreted from psychological perspectives, incorporating cognitive, developmental, and social

psychology to enhance understanding and appreciation (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2000). Wellek and Warren (1962) identify four meanings of this term: studying the author's psychological state, the creative process, psychological laws applied in literature, and the impact on readers. This research focuses on the third meaning, analyzing child abuse's psychological types and laws in Gabrielle Tallent's *\*My Absolute Darling\**. Abuse, an offense involving physical or psychological harm, includes physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual forms (Lawson, 2002). Emotional abuse and neglect are often underestimated but are common and difficult to define or legally prove. Verbal abuse, lacking physical traces, damages self-esteem (Lawson, 2002). Child abuse is socially and culturally constructed, varying across cultures. It includes physical, emotional, psychological, neglect, sexual, verbal, coercive control, and intimidation (Sanderson, 2004). WHO (2002) defines it as any form of ill-treatment resulting in harm to a child's health, development, or self-esteem in a context of trust. Physical abuse involves actions like hitting; emotional abuse affects emotional development; psychological abuse distorts self-perception; neglect fails to meet basic needs; sexual abuse includes forced activities; verbal abuse demeans through language; coercive control manipulates; and intimidation instills fear. Child abuse leads to health issues, trauma, behavioral problems, and social dysfunction, underscoring the need for early intervention and support (Sanderson, 2004).

## METHOD

The research employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze child abuse in Gabrielle Tallent's novel "My Absolute Darling," focusing on the main character, Julia Turtle Alveston. Qualitative research involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting non-numerical data to gain insights into specific phenomena. The psychological approach is used to understand the kinds, causes, and effects of abuse on Turtle Alveston, aiming to gain insight into human behavior and experiences. The primary data source is the novel itself, with data consisting of quotations, character conversations, and thoughts reflecting child abuse. The researcher serves as the primary instrument, engaging in a thorough reading and understanding of relevant references. Data collection involves reading the novel to identify instances of child abuse, noting and highlighting relevant data, and classifying it according to the research questions. Data analysis includes analyzing the classified data, interpreting it using psychological theories, and drawing conclusions based on the interpretations. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the abuse experienced by the main character and its impact.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Kinds of Child Abuse Turtle Alveston Experiences in Gabrielle Tallent's *My Absolute Darling*

#### a) Physical Abuse

In "My Absolute Darling," Martin's physical abuse of Turtle is overt and brutal, involving beatings, forced positions, and harsh training to control and intimidate her. This results in physical scars, chronic pain, and a profound sense of helplessness. Martin hits Turtle with his fists, slaps her, and uses objects like belts or sticks to inflict pain. The beatings are sudden and unpredictable, serving as punishments or expressions of Martin's rage and dominance. A week after a beating, Turtle's bruises remain,

causing her shame: "A week has passed since the beating, but the bruises are still there, and Turtle is ashamed of them" (Tallent, 2017:147). This abuse constantly reminds Turtle of her vulnerability and her father's control, trapping her in fear and submission.

b) Emotional Abuse

Martin's emotional abuse of Turtle is pervasive, marked by manipulative and demeaning behavior that erodes her self-esteem and self-worth. He belittles her, calls her names, and undermines her intelligence. He isolates Turtle by homeschooling her, restricting her interactions with peers and authority figures who could challenge his control. This isolation reinforces Turtle's dependence on him and prevents her from developing healthy relationships. In one scene, Turtle confronts her emotions about her mother's death and Martin's abuse: "I know that you think he's hurt me... if I am hurt it is because Martin hurt me" (Tallent, 2017:131). This scene highlights the complex emotions Turtle faces and her struggle with acknowledging Martin's abuse.

c) Psychological Abuse

Martin's psychological abuse is intertwined with the physical and emotional abuse, using fear, manipulation, and indoctrination to control Turtle's mind. In a poignant exchange, Turtle denies Martin's abuse despite evidence: "He doesn't hit me," Turtle says, watching Anna to see if she believes her (Tallent, 2017:131). Martin conditions Turtle to distrust outsiders and defend his actions. This psychological manipulation leaves Turtle in a state of hypervigilance, dependent on Martin's approval and terrified of his disapproval. Turtle's journey is not only one of physical survival but also a battle to reclaim her mind and sense of self from her father's psychological torment.

d) Verbal Abuse

Turtle endures relentless verbal abuse from her father, Martin, who uses words to belittle and control her. His actions grow increasingly erratic and threatening, evident when he aggressively throws a notebook and breaks a pencil, expressing his frustration through repetitive phrases like "Okay, all right" (Tallent, 2017:4). This verbal assault drives Turtle to self-criticism, with her thoughts dominated by "stupid, stupid, stupid" and feelings of inadequacy. Martin's rhetorical questions, such as "Is this the sum of your ambition? To be an illiterate little slit?" (Tallent, 2017:19), further undermine her self-worth, showcasing the profound psychological damage inflicted by his abuse.

e) Coercive Control

Coercive control is a central element of Martin's abuse, evident in a scene where he physically asserts his dominance over Julia. As she pleads with him, calling him "Daddy" in a desperate attempt to evoke any remaining empathy, he coldly asserts, "You are mine, you little bitch, you are mine" (Tallent, 2017:104). This possessive language reduces Julia to mere property, stripping her of autonomy and personhood. Her rational understanding of the abuse contrasts with her helplessness, deepening her psychological trauma. The abuse not only causes physical pain but also instills a damaging obsession with pleasing him and a self-loathing belief in her worthlessness.

f) Intimidation and Threats

Martin uses violence and threats to intimidate his daughter, Turtle. He forces Turtle to do pull-ups from a block while holding a knife between his legs. Knives pose a

frightening threat, which, if Turtle falls, could result in serious injury or death. Turtle described tension and fear when describing her experience: "He put a knife between my legs. So, if I fall off the beam—" His voice trailed off, unable to finish his sentence. "Every pull-up is a choice, and doing it requires discipline and courage." (Tallent, 2017:41).

#### g) Sexual Abuse

In Gabrielle Tallent's "My Absolute Darling," sexual abuse is portrayed as both a physical violation and a tool for control. Martin's abuse of Turtle is not merely physical but an assertion of dominance, exemplified by a scene where he wields a knife to enforce his will. As Turtle hangs from a beam, Martin presses the knife against her body, cutting through her jeans and touching her skin. The passage underscores the terror and vulnerability Turtle experiences, with Martin's menacing presence amplifying the sense of fear. The knife becomes a symbol of Martin's authority, creating a volatile and oppressive environment that strips Turtle of her autonomy and heightens her sense of helplessness. The setting, marked by dust and neglect, further emphasizes the bleakness of Turtle's situation (Tallent, 2017:41).

#### h) The Cause of Child Abuse Found in Gabrielle Tallent's *My Absolute Darling*

Gabrielle Tallent's novel reveals how family dynamics perpetuate child abuse through the toxic relationship between Turtle and her father, Martin. Martin's abusive control isolates Turtle, undermining her self-esteem and presenting himself as her sole protector. This manipulation confines Turtle to a distorted perception of reality and intimacy, deepening her dependency on Martin. The remote setting where they live shields his abuse from external scrutiny, reinforcing Turtle's isolation. Martin's abusive behavior becomes normalized for Turtle, making it difficult for her to recognize or articulate her suffering. Despite Martin's moments of apparent situation. This lack of external support traps Turtle in a cycle of abuse, exacerbating her sense of helplessness and isolation.

## 2. The Effects of Child Abuse Found in Gabrielle Tallent's *My Absolute Darling*

### a) Psychological and Emotional Trauma

From a young age, Turtle experienced severe emotional manipulation and abuse from Martin, which instilled a deep sense of worthlessness and self-doubt. According to Nurhadi (2018) psychological and emotional trauma can construct a person's mentality and personality. Therefore, this is a common psychological outcome for victims, where the attitude and control of the abuser damages the victim's self-esteem. In the narrative, Turtle's internal monologue reflects his struggle with self-loathing and confusion. He often blamed himself for his father's anger and violence, reflecting the typical characteristic of abused children who internalize negative perceptions of the perpetrator.

In his interactions with Anna, Turtle displays a deep sense of self-doubt. When Anna tried to encourage him, he said, "Julia, you come to school, stare out the window, don't pay attention, don't study, and don't have any friends. You stop at the first question on the exam and think, 'I don't know,' and sit there hating yourself" (Tallent, 2017:129). Anna tries to convince Turtle that the problem is not with his intelligence, but with his self-confidence and approach to learning.

One of the main psychological impacts of Martin's abuse is Turtle's internal belief that his abusive behavior is a distorted form of love. Martin's manipulation blurs the lines between affection and control, causing Turtle to rationalize his behavior as a misguided form of care. This can be seen from Martin's very meaningful words, "Is this the sum of your ambition? Become an illiterate 'stupid membrane'?" (Talent, 2017:19). This insult strikes Turtle on multiple levels, insulting her intelligence and femininity, and reinforcing the idea that she is nothing without Martin. The silence in the truck before Martin speaks adds to the emotional tension, making the offense even more painful and damaging.

#### b) Social Dysfunction

Turtle's father exerts significant control over her life, isolating her from the outside world through emotional manipulation, physical violence, and psychological control. He convinces her that the outside world is dangerous and that she can rely only on him, resulting in her deep mistrust of others. This conditioning leads Turtle to view the world and its people with apprehension and suspicion.

Jacob and Brett's approach to Turtle contrasts sharply with her father's methods. They show patience and respect, offering a glimpse of healthy, supportive relationships. Their non-judgmental presence helps Turtle lower her defenses, treating her as an equal rather than an outsider. Jacob's willingness to include her is evident when he says, "I'd date a blind girl, though, not just because she was blind. What I mean is—I don't think it'd matter" (Talent, 2017:59). Brett provocatively adds, "I'd date her just for being blind," highlighting the complexity of objectification (Talent, 2017:59).

Turtle's hyper-vigilance, a product of her abusive upbringing, is both a survival tactic and a barrier to forming healthy relationships. Her acute awareness and survival skills are strengths born from adversity but also hinder her ability to engage fully with the world outside her father's control.

## CONCLUSION

Gabrielle Tallent's *My Absolute Darling* explores the profound effects of child abuse through Julia "Turtle" Alveston's experiences. The research, using a psychological approach, dissects the abuse inflicted by her father, Martin, revealing dimensions of physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, coercive control, intimidation, and sexual abuse. Martin's authoritarian dominance isolates Turtle, indoctrinates her with a distorted survivalist ideology, and erodes her self-worth. This isolation prevents her from seeking help or envisioning life beyond his control. The study links Martin's abusive behavior to dysfunctional family dynamics and his unresolved psychological traumas, which perpetuate a cycle of violence and control. Turtle's psychological effects include chronic anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and emotional numbness, compounded by physical health issues and behavioral problems. Her social interactions suffer due to her inability to trust and form healthy relationships. The research highlights the critical need for awareness, intervention, and support for child abuse victims. Turtle's story underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of addressing underlying family dynamics to prevent such harm. The findings emphasize the necessity of comprehensive support systems for victims, advocating for societal commitment to protect vulnerable children. The study calls for a compassionate and proactive approach to addressing and preventing child abuse, fostering a safer environment for all children.

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